

An interview with George O. Nichols

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GEORGE O. NICHOLS

An Interview Conducted by

William B. Pickett

July 2, 1981

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"WORKS OF REFERENCE"

NARRATOR DATA SHEET

June 26, 1981

DATE

Name of narrator: George O. Nichols
Address: 116 Allendale Place, Terre Haute, IN 47802 Phone: 299-1004
Birthdate: June 27, 1915 Birthplace: Clinton, Indiana
Length of residence in Terre Haute: Since January, 1946
Education: _____

Occupational history: Bought Nichols Loan with brother-in-law in 1936. "Public Loan" owned by father in 1936. Bought it from his father. Went on active duty with U.S. Air Force as 1st Lt. July 2, 1941--discharged July 1, 1946. European Theater, executive officer of 404th fighter group. First to go into the Normandy invasion. Every pilot had a P-47 aircraft.
Special interests, activities, etc. Had interest in and control of Terre Haute Morris Plan. Sold all interest in approximately 1959. For additional information, see Terre Haute and Her People of Progress, 1970, 170, 265. (Vigo County Public Library Special Collections)
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<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Interviewer</u>
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GEORGE O. NICHOLS

Tape 1

July 2, 1981

Office at Nichols Investment Corp., 1201 South 3rd St.,
Terre Haute, IN 47802

INTERVIEWER: William B. Pickett

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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WBP: This is Thursday, July 2, 1981, and I am William Pickett. I'm talking today with Mr. George Nichols in his office at Nichols Loan in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Mr. Nichols, you were born in 1915 in Clinton, Indiana. What was your father's occupation at the time?

NICHOLS: My father and grandfather, whom I was named after, operated the Nichols and Son grocery on North Main Street, and I was born in a house next to the grocery and learned to walk in the grocery. My father sold that business in about 1920 and entered the automobile business as a dealer of cars such as the Oakland and Page, Chalmers, and the Cleveland -- some of which I remember.

WBP: Were those produced in the state of Indiana?

NICHOLS: No, not entirely. I don't know where they were produced to tell you the truth. But he sold the automobile business in 1923 and retired. Then he started the Public Loan Company in Clinton on March 17, 1924. He had previous financial experience, having been a large stockholder in one of the banks and also interested in a savings and loan company in Clinton.

WBP: Do you know why he sold his automobile business? First of all, maybe we should say, why did he sell his wholesale . . . I mean his grocery store? Is it a general store or just . . .

NICHOLS: It was a grocery store. And interestingly enough, in those days the coal mines were working around Clinton and this area; and he was the first person, I think, to sell groceries in this area on credit. And he did a large credit business and operated many wagons that delivered groceries to the various mining communities outside of Clinton. And he went out of the business, I think . . . he sold to one of his employees and decided after the war World War I that the

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NICHOLS: automobile business would be better. And then he sold that to one of his employees. That was when he retired. He really had no plans for the future, but then he eventually got started in the finance business.

WBP: Did he extend credit to the mine families? Families of the miners?

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: Were you aware of any hard times in the mines around that time?

NICHOLS: Well, no, I was only about 5 or 6 years old then.

WBP: Do you think that had anything to do with his decision to perhaps get out of the grocery?

NICHOLS: No, I really wouldn't know that. I don't know that it was.

WBP: Do you know anything about the success of his auto dealership? Whether that was . . .

NICHOLS: Well, it was successful.

WBP: . . . apparently thriving.

NICHOLS: Yes, it was successful. As a matter of fact, one of the men that used to call on him on behalf of one of the automobile companies later became president and chief executive officer of the First National Bank in Cincinnati.

WBP: What was his name?

NICHOLS: Waldo Pierson, P-i-e-r-s-o-n. And when I called on Mr. Pierson in 1948 to see about arranging a line of credit for our finance company, he told me that he hadn't seen me since he had visited in my home in Clinton when I was 6 or 7 years of age. I did not remember him, but he had high regard for my father and they seemed to have a mutual admiration society going between them. And it so turned out that over the years I enjoyed a very, very favorable relationship with this bank when we were expanding.

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WBP: That was a tribute to your father's success.
That was a tribute to your father's stature and
standing.

NICHOLS: Yes.

WBP: In these days, was Clinton . . . did Clinton
consider itself to be fairly independent, autonomous,
or did they consider themselves to be in Terre
Haute's sphere of economic influence?

NICHOLS: Well, I think it was rather independent when
the coal mines were operating. I can remember
just as a young boy. I went away to school at
Culver Military Academy in 1928, and two years prior
to going to Culver (I was only 13 at the time) I
sold newspapers on the street in Clinton. I was
the agent for the old Terre Haute Post. The paper
sold at that time for two cents, and I paid the
company one cent and got to keep a penny myself.
I enjoyed this very much. It made me independent
of my family. I never had to ask for an allowance
and I never got one.

There was great competition between us on
the street, in selling papers in those days. One
day I engaged in a little scuffle back of the
barber shop with another newsboy, and my mother
found out about this and was very unhappy. In
fact she was unhappy that I was selling papers on
the streets anyway. But after that, soon after
that it was decided I might get a better education
at Culver Military Academy than I would at Clinton
High School, so in September 1928 I went to
Culver. It was the Sunday before Labor Day that
September that I took my first airplane ride for
\$1.00 near the Parke-Vigo County line. The plane
crashed the following Thursday killing the two
men who built it.

WBP: I see.

NICHOLS: Then at that time, of course, the mines were
not working nearly as well as they had before, and
I was away at school -- Culver 'til '33. However,
I was always interested in the finance business.
I learned to figure interest on loans when I was
ten years old. When I was home, I always traveled
with my father and visited the office. At that
time -- in the late '20s -- we had offices in
Clinton and Montezuma, which we later moved to
Rockville. We opened an office in Terre Haute in
1925 in the old Fairbanks Building which was at
7th and Wabash.

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NICHOLS: And then after being on the 2nd or 3rd floor (I forget which) for about 10 years, we moved to the ground floor in about 1935. This time we also opened another office in Terre Haute. It was called the Hoosier Finance Company, and it was in the National building on the 6th Street side near Wabash -- 6th and Wabash.

And Mr. Ferrall Rippetoe was the manager who later became very active in radio with WBOW and with the Spectator in later life.

WBP: Do you remember coming to Terre Haute as a child before you went to Culver? Or perhaps . . .

NICHOLS: Oh, yes, I remember coming to Terre Haute and through Terre Haute during my early years. My mother's mother, my Grandmother Ackelmire, A-c-k-e-l-m-i-r-e, was born in Brazil and my grandmother lived there. And my grandfather, Grandfather Ackelmire, was the first mayor of Brazil in 1876.

WBP: Now, is that right? Hmm.

NICHOLS: He was the county treasurer when they moved the courthouse from Bowling Green to Brazil and then it was incorporated into city status, town status, and he was elected the mayor. And he was previously married, and his first wife was the first woman buried in the cemetery just west of Brazil. My Grandmother Ackelmire . . . my grandmother is also buried there.

WBP: So you were, as a child, familiar with Terre Haute and sold the Terre Haute newspaper.

NICHOLS: Yes, and we used to take the interurban, of course, from Clinton to Terre Haute and then over to Brazil to visit my grandmother.

WBP: What were your feelings about Terre Haute back in those days? How do you remember it? What things do you remember about it?

NICHOLS: Well, I remember the King Lem Inn, the Chinese restaurant on Wabash Avenue where the Terre Haute House is now. It was a great treat to go there to eat.

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WBP: But this . . . was this in the old Terre Haute House building, the one that preceded the present building which was built in 1928 /1927/?

NICHOLS: Yes. I believe it was.

WBP: It had turrets and it was red brick. And awnings . . .

NICHOLS: I believe that's where it was located. And then I remember going to the theaters down here, and I remember the first talking motion pictures were at the Grand. I remember there was some speculation by cynics who said there were really people back of the screen doing the talking.

WBP: (laughs heartily)

Did Terre Haute seem to be prosperous in those days back in . . . I suppose the 1920s you're talking about?

NICHOLS: Well, yes, it seemed to be sort of the center of the Wabash Valley. I think the interurban traffic . . . you see they had interurbans running from Paris and Clinton, Brazil, and Sullivan into Terre Haute. And I think that had a great deal to do with making Terre Haute a sort of the center of the Wabash Valley. And, of course, there was rivalry between the neighboring towns' high schools and the Terre Haute schools in athletics -- football, basketball particularly.

I also remember it as being one of the dirtiest cities that I have ever been in with possibly the exception of Pittsburgh before it was cleaned up. And that situation existed when I came here to live permanently in 1946.

WBP: This has appeared in other interviews. To what do you attribute the dirt?

NICHOLS: Well, it was the use of soft coal.

WBP: But was it . . . I get the impression that the people remember that about Terre Haute in a way they perhaps don't remember that about other cities who were burning soft coal, too.

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NICHOLS: Well, that's right but you know there was a lot of industry here that burned it and more so probably than the other cities. I presume that's what it was. I don't really know. That's what I thought as a child anyway.

WBP: So . . . are you talking about smoke in the air?

NICHOLS: That's right. And, of course, atmospheric conditions. In some cities there were . . . you know prevailing winds, I guess, would carry it away. But it seemed like at certain times of the year in Terre Haute, it just hung over the city. It was there. You'd have a difficult time seeing across the street sometimes, half a block away.

WBP: What about the city itself? Was it picked up or was it unkempt, would you say?

NICHOLS: Well, I don't remember that it was in any worse condition or any better either than most other cities. I remember very favorably Collett Park on the north side of town, because I used to go there as a little boy with my Grandmother Nichols and play in the park because there were a lot of people from Vermillion County that she was acquainted with, I guess, at that time that lived in that area. And it was a family park and still is. I moved there in April 1946. I bought a house at 7th and Barbour across from the park and raised my family there.

WBP: What was that address?

NICHOLS: I lived at 7th and Barbour.

WBP: Seventh and Barbour on the corner?

NICHOLS: On the corner.

WBP: Which . . . let's see. Which corner would that be?

NICHOLS: It'd be the southwest corner. I believe it was 2310 North 7th.

WBP: How did you happen to move to Terre Haute instead of to Clinton when you came out of the service?

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NICHOLS: Well, I was an attorney. I got admitted to the bar after I graduated from the University of Michigan law school in '41. I took the bar exam on the 22nd and 23rd of June 1941. I was a first lieutenant in the infantry, and I was assigned to the Army Air Corps for technical training command at Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. They were calling up reserve officers, and I was ordered to duty for one year and went there July 7th, 1941. My father called me the following day on July 8 and informed me that a letter had come to our house informing me I had passed the bar exam and should be in Indianapolis on Thursday, July the 11th, to be admitted to the bar. So, I went to the headquarters of the base, the commanding officer's office, secured permission, and was put on orders to go to Indianapolis so that I could be admitted before the Indiana Supreme Court and Federal District Court. And I later . . . a few years later one day as I was reviewing my 201 file, I looked up the authority for them to send me to Indianapolis. I found I had been put on detached service for one day for the purpose of playing polo! This was just to cover me, of course, in case of an accident. I doubt if there's ever been anyone ever admitted to the bar that got there on Army orders that provided that he was placed there for one day for the purpose of playing polo.

WBP: Ha!

NICHOLS: Especially an infantry officer assigned to the Army Air Corps.

WBP: Yes. Ha.

NICHOLS: So, after the war /World War II and having served 4½ years in service, I came to Terre Haute on January 3rd, 1946, and took over the operating of our loan office -- then the Public Loan Company on North 7th Street next to Hooks drugstore. I'd always wanted to go into the finance business. I tell people I learned to make reports in my father's office. I was 10 years old when he entered the business, and I used to stay around the office. And the girls would show me how to make the reports and figure interest. I was always interested in that. And that was why after Culver I chose the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania to continue my education. I've had some opportunities after the war to practice law in Vermillion County, Terre Haute and Indianapolis. My first wife, Janet, who was raised in Washington, D.C., and lived there during World War II with her mother, was quite

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NICHOLS: disappointed that I didn't take advantage of some opportunities that were offered to me in Washington to practice law. But I decided that I wanted to live in the Hoosier state and that I wanted to go in the finance business and that's what I did.

WBP: Um hm. Did you ever practice law?

NICHOLS: No, I never practiced. My first year in the service at Chanute Field, I was actively engaged in court martial work. I became the chief defense counsel for a year for all the courts. And then I was transferred to the prosecution side as trial judge advocate.

WBP: So you did practice military law?

NICHOLS: Yes, I did.

WBP: The Uniform Code of Military Justice.

NICHOLS: That's right. I might say I was transferred because when I was defense counsel, I got so many of the soldiers acquitted I was informed that no one was ever tried unless he was guilty, but that wasn't the way I understood the law. But anyway I was transferred to the other side of the courtroom.

WBP: Yes, that must have upset the military hierarchy a bit. (laughs) So, you have practiced law in that sense?

NICHOLS: Yes, I have.

WBP: You had a taste of it.

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: I still want to get back to Terre Haute. You talked about Terre Haute being dirty, but you also apparently were attracted to it. You mentioned coming to shows here.

NICHOLS: Well, it was the largest city in this area and it was easy to get to. I remember when I got my bicycle, when I was 13 -- 12 or 13 years old -- why one of the neighbor boys and myself rode our bicycles down to Terre Haute on the west side of the river and across the bridge and rode back to Clinton on the east side of the river. So . . .

WBP: So, apparently you're saying that transportation had a good bit to do with people's gravitation to Terre Haute.

NICHOLS: That's right.

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WBP: People would come here for . . . to get a greater selection of goods to buy, I suppose?

NICHOLS: That's right. And for entertainment features. There was the old stadium on East Wabash where they had baseball games. Terre Haute was a member of the old Three-I league. And I was in those days very interested in baseball. My father was a Chicago Cub fan, and so we went to Chicago a couple of times a year to see Cub series and then we would, between times, come to Terre Haute to see the ball games.

WBP: How often probably would you come to Terre Haute? Three times a week or . . .

NICHOLS: Oh, no. No, no. In those days I would say when I was a little boy, probably . . . well, we went through Terre Haute to visit my grandmother. She lived in Brazil until the time I was about 8 or 9 years old, and then she moved to Clinton and made her home with us. She died when I was in England in World War II, in 1944. So, I suppose we came through Terre Haute, oh, on an average of . . . we came through Terre Haute probably two or three times a month, four times.

Of course, later on as I grew older, I was in Terre Haute quite often because I came down with other people, and there was quite a selection of young women here, young ladies that we became interested in and . . . in this area, and there was more to do in Terre Haute than there was in Clinton.

WBP: More night spots?

NICHOLS: Yes, I'd say so.

WBP: What kinds of things would you do on dates?

NICHOLS: Oh, we would go out to Wassell's on East Wabash, and there was dancing out there to jukebox. The Trianon was open. They had fine bands and they had some dances out there.

I had a junior membership in the Terre Haute Country Club when I was 16 I guess, 17 years old. And I came to social affairs there. And a lot of movies and things like that.

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WBP: Were you aware of the vice district as a young man?

NICHOLS: Oh, I think so. I think everybody knew the west end of town. It was just . . . it was also a produce center down there. Markets were down there. The city market was in that area. And everyone was acquainted with it.

WBP: So, it was a place where at least during the day there would be a collection of people . . . farmers coming in selling their goods?

NICHOLS: That's correct.

WBP: And grocers buying vegetables and various kinds like that?

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: So, it would be a rich, interesting area of town? Similar to a European market district?

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: Were there other areas of town that were particularly interesting and that you could pretty well count on being a crowd of people or a gathering of people?

Now, you don't have to confine it to your young childhood. It could be later that you remember as well.

NICHOLS: Well, activities out at the stadium, of course, drew large crowds of people. As I was growing up, why . . . I mean the fairgrounds wasn't started until after World War II here.

And we did have . . . oh, another thing that we had in Terre Haute that . . . in earlier days in my life was the very extensive streetcar system. I roomed with a boy at the University of Pennsylvania one year who was interested in transportation. He could tell you how to get from any city in the world to another city by ship. Or within the country, he could tell you where the trains ran and then within the city, he could tell you about it -- city transportation. And he came home with me one vacation period to visit for a few days, and I brought him to Terre Haute and I had a date. He didn't want to go out with a girl, and he spent about four hours at night riding all over town on the streetcars because he was just interested in transportation.

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NICHOLS: Don't know what ever happened to him. I know prior to the war he stopped in one day, and he was operating a bus company up in Minnesota where he was born and raised. I don't know what ever happened to him later, but he was a very interesting person. He was interested in transportation, and he thought that Terre Haute had an excellent streetcar system. It covered the entire city.

WBP: So, the transportation centers, I suppose, then in the downtown area where all the transportation converged would be . . . you could always count on there being crowds of people then.

NICHOLS: Oh, that's right.

WBP: It was rather . . . like the Chicago loop in that sense.

NICHOLS: That's right. We had a lot of railroads here, and we had a lot of interurbans between the cities. Then the town itself had a very strong streetcar system.

WBP: Um hm. Do you remember the Terminal Arcade being a . . .

NICHOLS: Yes. Oh, yes.

WBP: And Union Station, I suppose, was rather busy?

NICHOLS: Yes, I remember it very well. That's right.

WBP: In your young adulthood what do you feel was unique or distinctive about Terre Haute? How was it different from other cities after you came back from the war?

NICHOLS: Well, I was not very happy in the summertime with the climate in this area. I think today we forget that we just take air-conditioning for granted. But I can remember growing up in the '20s and '30s. In the summertime particularly it was very, very hot and humid. And I can remember days when it never got below 98 or 99 degrees in a 24-hour period for three and four days at a time. It doesn't seem like we have those days any more but maybe we do. But we certainly don't notice them with our offices air-conditioned and cars air-conditioned and public places air-conditioned. I

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NICHOLS: did go out west a lot. Our family traveled a lot in the summer, and we usually went someplace where it was cooler. But we didn't go to Indiana lakes because I went to Culver in school in the winter. I didn't want to go back up in that area in the summer. And the weather in northern Indiana wasn't that much better. Of course, it was very good in northern Michigan, but we usually went to the east coast or the west coast . . . rather to the mountains in the West.

WBP: Are you saying also that many people who could afford to would go away from Terre Haute on vacations to perhaps miss the harshest part of the winter or the hottest part of summer?

NICHOLS: Yes, I think that's right. They went to Florida, and they still do. I think more people went away then in the summer to northern Michigan probably or northern Indiana than they do today. Many more people had homes at lakes around northern Indiana.

WBP: Do you know of Terre Haute enclaves -- people who would . . . neighborhoods or groups of friends who would go on vacation together?

NICHOLS: Well, there were a lot of Culver families, I guess, that had homes at Lake Maxinkuckee where Culver is. I still visit Charlie Ray there in the summer. His grandmother built a cottage. Mrs. Hord built a cottage up there, I think, in 1880 or 1890. She lived in Terre Haute.

The Crawfords had a home there, and there were many people around from Terre Haute Herz, Duenwegs, Hughes.

WBP: Today, it's common for people to go to Florida in the wintertime.

NICHOLS: That's correct.

WBP: And they go to certain places in Florida, do they not?

NICHOLS: That's right. I guess they do.

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WBP: Do you know what those places are?

NICHOLS: In Florida?

WBP: Yes.

NICHOLS: Now?

WBP: Uh-huh.

NICHOLS: Well, there's a lot of people go to Fort Lauderdale now, around that area from Terre Haute. Then there's a lot of Terre Haute families who live in Naples, Sarasota, and various places in Florida. These are probably the principal ones.

WBP: Are there other ways Terre Haute was unique or distinctive? Say, in '46 or '47.

NICHOLS: Well, yes. Industry was beginning to change. I mean you were beginning to . . . I noticed it particularly in the clientele that we served in our finance business. And it seemed to me that we were in a period of adjustment, economically. The transportation systems were changing. The diesel engine replaced, of course, the steam locomotive. And the repair work done on the railroad car shops here became a thing of the past. Coal mines the same way with . . . mining played a less important part of the economy. Allis-Chalmers built a large plant here to produce some aircraft parts. And then we changed . . . see, it changed our industry. We never seemed to be a really boom-town. It sort of . . . but I never, as long as I can remember . . . maybe . . . I guess when I was a boy -- a very young boy -- it might have been a boom area with the coal mines operating. But I certainly wasn't very much interested in economics at that time. But later it was a somewhat of a depressed area. Certainly Vermillion County was. I can remember vividly in the mid '30s we had the highest percentage on WPA Works Progress Administration in the state of Indiana per capita in that county. And I believe that then the WPA workers got paid twice a month. They got paid in Vermillion County \$44 a month, but I guess they deemed the cost-of-living was higher in Terre Haute because I believe they got \$46 a month in Terre Haute.

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WBP: Terre Haute was . . . then you do not remember a boom time? Was it not attractive to new industry? Of course, there was depression all over the country in the 1930s.

NICHOLS: That's right!

WBP: Well, do you know of groups of civic-minded people who attempted to go out and attract new industry and had a hard time bringing in new industries?

NICHOLS: Oh, yes, I think the Chamber of Commerce always attempted to do this; and they also always attempted to solve the parking problem downtown. I tried to get them to go to Danville, Illinois, and see what they had done there because in Danville business groups . . . or businessmen contributed money to a fund that would buy old buildings and tear them down and make parking lots out of them. In fact, I opened . . . I worked for the first week in the finance office that we opened in Danville in 1939, before I went back to law school. And then my brother worked there for a year after he graduated from Indiana before he went into the service. And he made his home there after World War II. So I was quite familiar with what Danville was doing. And I urged people in Terre Haute to look into their system, but they kept maybe spending another \$15 or \$20, \$25 thousand for a survey. Seems like Terre Haute has been one of the greatest towns for surveys . . . spending money on surveys. And then nothing's ever accomplished from them.

WBP: Investigations, studies -- feasibility studies -- that kind of thing?

NICHOLS: Well, I don't think it goes into feasibility studies.

WBP: They never . . .

NICHOLS: We spent an awful lot of time, money and . . . over many, many years talking about dredging the Wabash. That became a political issue. I can remember in my early years people talking about dredging the Wabash and that kept up until about . . . as recently as maybe five or six years ago. I think . . . I don't think we'll hear much more about that in the future.

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WBP: Why is it that Terre Haute is different from Danville in this regard? Basically, you're saying that the Chamber of Commerce attempted to deal with things. They surveyed things and they attempted to deal with the parking downtown . . .

NICHOLS: Danville, for instance, got new industry into town more quickly than we did in Terre Haute. I was in a position to compare both communities. Terre Haute, however, kept plugging away, and I think we've done a real fine job in Terre Haute. I think we just got a little bit slower start. I think there was certain self-satisfaction in this status quo in Terre Haute that doesn't exist in another city. We've always seemed to lack . . . younger people in Terre Haute have always seemed to lack the initiative in assuming or taking over leadership roles. It appeared to me even when I came here in '46.

WBP: Why?

NICHOLS: (laugh) I guess they were satisfied with the status quo. I don't know. They didn't want to "rock the boat." There was nothing cynical on it, nothing sinister about this. I heard, you know, it attributed to certain groups that they didn't want Terre Haute to be progressive, but I got acquainted with these people and groups of people and I never found that to be true at all. It just . . . the people just seem to be willing to accept the status quo for a much longer period of time than they did otherwise. But as we have brought in the new industries in Terre Haute and as we have expanded our educational institutions, why that thing has changed. These people have brought many new ideas to the community and the community has accepted them. I can remember when the Terre Haute Country Club 25 years ago was almost broke, couldn't pay the bills. And a group that hadn't been in Terre Haute ten years before brought in some consultants from Chicago and revised the thinking and opened the membership and borrowed some money and expanded the physical facilities and the Country Club grew a great deal.

WBP: A group of newcomers -- new young executives?

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NICHOLS: Well, yes. They weren't all too young -- at that time -- but they were people that had moved into the town in recent years. They weren't the old families.

WBP: Do you remember had they moved in from one . . . to come to work for one industry?

NICHOLS: No.

WBP: Or several . . .

NICHOLS: Several industries. Several industries.

WBP: People might have come in with say, CBS or J. I. Case or Anaconda?

NICHOLS: Well, George Johnson came here and started Chesty potato chips and he was very active. George Wiemuth moved here from Valparaiso and I think he worked with Johnson. And I just don't remember all of them now, but there was a group that got together that got things moving along.

WBP: There has been, in other words . . . Terre Haute hasn't declined as it might.

NICHOLS: No, it hasn't declined at all in that regard. To its everlasting credit there has been growth in Terre Haute to take the . . . or replacement, you might say, to take the place of the industries that became obsolete or went out of business. And they were solid industries. I mean it hasn't been . . . it's been pretty good diversification. It hasn't been just one industry. It's not a one-industry town today. Consider Terre Haute today is . . . economically is as sound as any in the state of Indiana. And I think it's had that status for probably the last 10 or 12 years. And it will continue to have if people will continue to work for its progress.

WBP. What are the most important changes that have occurred in Terre Haute during your lifetime here in the . . . that you . . . that you're aware of?

NICHOLS: Well, I suppose the biggest changes -- but it's not only Terre Haute -- have been the development of 3rd Street from the northern part of the city limits to the southern part. And this was done, of course, through government aid and government programs. Many people were against it, and they

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NICHOLS: said that there wouldn't be anyone who had the money to invest in the community, to do the things that were planned. But that didn't prove to be true. People did invest their money. It wasn't always local people; it was outside. But all you have to do is look at Honey Creek [Square] and look at both sides of 3rd Street from the southern tip of the city to the northern tip. This used to . . . 3rd Street used to be just a two-lane street flanked by many small homes.

WBP: So, basically, you're saying that the main street has changed from Wabash to 3rd Street.

NICHOLS: Oh, absolutely! Terrifically, tremendously because of development of 3rd Street. And, again, a lot of the buildings . . . we have [an] historical interest in old buildings, but so many of the buildings downtown is this community -- and in many cities in the midwest -- were really poorly constructed. We've face-lifted them by new fronts and all that, but they really should have been torn down and replaced with better buildings.

WBP: Of course, an aerial photograph of Terre Haute will show that that's what Terre Haute's been doing.

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: It's been tearing down its buildings . . .

NICHOLS: That's right. And I think that's a great thing. I think that 50 years from now we'll profit by it . . . by that.

WBP: Of course, the main concern now is the downtown area. It was just in the news last night. We were . . . the outside developer coming in and talking about the possibilities for a new downtown retail center.

NICHOLS: Well, if we have that, it won't be a downtown such as it was in the '30s or '40s. It will be a different type downtown which it should be. It should identify the needs for the future.

WBP: What you're saying then is that Terre Haute has been responsive to the changes in the nation's economy.

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NICHOLS: I think so.

WBP: And the new retailing center is Honey Creek which is what? Three miles south of the downtown area, and there is very little anybody would have been able to do about that. That's what the economic laws dictated.

Over the years though there's been this certain kind of . . . Terre Haute has become notorious in certain ways. And I don't know whether that notoriety is deserved.

What about the quality of government in the city? Has it been a good . . . has it made the city attractive to new business? Or has the quality of government over the years been a deterrent to bringing in new industry?

NICHOLS: Well, I don't know whether I'm in a position to answer that or not. I don't think that . . . I don't think the quality of government in the time that I've been here has been any better than any place else or probably any worse than any other cities. I think it's been average. I don't think it's had much to do with bringing in . . . I don't think it's had anything to do with keeping industry out. I think all administrations that have been here tried to bring in industry, worked for that.

WBP: Tried to accommodate the desires of new industry?

NICHOLS: That's right. We have done one thing in this community. I remember hearing Vern McMillan make a public statement while he was mayor, which was up to about /19/48, I believe, or '49 when Ralph Tucker succeeded him. And he was deploring the fact that one out of four homes in Terre Haute was not connected to a sanitary sewer. Many of them still used a Chick Sales outhouse. I remember hearing that one night, and it made quite an impression on me.

And so when I was asked by Mayor Lee Larrison when he became mayor to serve on the sanitary district, I accepted it. And we built several million dollars' worth of new sewers. And, fortunately, we were preceded by and succeeded by

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NICHOLS: people that had the same desire to improve this situation. This is something that is not seen by most people, and they don't realize it. But we've got a fine sanitary sewer system and in the last 25 years, why we've certainly corrected all the lack of facilities that we had for so long. I firmly believe that without proper sewerage it is difficult for a city to expand.

WBP: You did bring up Ralph Tucker though and you did bring up a certain inadequacy that existed as late as 1968, right?

NICHOLS: Well, no, the administration that was in when . . . well, Ralph Tucker was the mayor that Larrison succeeded. But in his . . . the latter part of his administration his sanitary district commissioners made plans and accomplished . . . made some real accomplishments in the development of the sanitary sewers in Terre Haute and the sanitary district.

WBP: I see. So the Tucker administration helped to set the stage for the accomplishments during . . .

NICHOLS: Yes, I would say that the latter part of his administration did.

WBP: How would you characterize the administration of Ralph Tucker, the 20-year mayor? Would you say that he served well?

NICHOLS: Well, it's a matter of public record that I was not a strong political supporter of Ralph Tucker, particularly when he got nominated for governor in 1956 because I made a speech in October of '56 to the Women's Republican Club, Fountain County, on a Friday noon that was reprinted Saturday morning on the front page of the Indianapolis Star -- the lead article with eight column headlines. And that afternoon Mr. Pulliam, who was the owner and publisher of the Indianapolis Star and News, informed me by telephone that he had been served a five-day notice that unless /the article was retracted we would be sued. I told Pulliam I would not retract my statement. Pulliam said he would stand by me and we were each served for one half million dollars. Tucker dropped the lawsuit after having lost the governorship by a large majority.7

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NICHOLS: I had an office in Michigan City, Indiana, that I started in about 1948. And in '56 the chamber of commerce hired a young man that at one time had been employed before the war in our office in Terre Haute. And he left . . . I think he worked for General Tel and then he left to go into chamber of commerce work. And while he was engaged as secretary of the chamber of commerce in either New Albany . . . or Jeffersonville, he was in the mayor's office one day down there and a fellow came in and slashed his face with a razor -- a gambler or something. There were some kind of problems going on. Anyway Dudley left the city and he was employed in Michigan City. And he called and he said since you have an office here and since I worked for your company at one time, I would consider it an honor if you would come up for the reception the community's having for me. And I said, "I'll do that." So I did. And I met a man there that had moved his office from New York. He was in the magazine subscription business, and his claim to fame was that he had the largest desk of any man in the city. He was a short, heavy-set fellow. I don't remember his name. But I spent the night in the old Spalding Hotel, and when I got off the elevator the next day, he was waiting by the elevator and asked me to have breakfast with him. We got talking about Tucker and about his nomination. And he told me that . . . he indicated . . . I told him I didn't think Tucker was qualified for the job. And he went on to tell me how inept he thought he would be as governor. And I presumed that he was against him. And then he told me how many thousands of dollars that he had donated to his campaign, and I said, "I find this a little difficult when you say how inept he is or will be if he's elected and then you support him financially." "Oh," he said, "I've arranged if we can do that, I'll be able to steal the state of Indiana blind."

Now, I'm certain that Ralph Tucker had nothing to do with this, personally. I never charged that he did have, and I don't think . . . I ever even told Ralph the story. But I was determined . . . and this fellow seemed to be determined to accomplish his end /and I was determined/ that if I could do anything to stop it, why I would. And so, I worked very hard in that /Harold W./ Handley

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NICHOLS: /gubernatorial/ campaign. And so that's how that . . . how I got interested in the election.

WBP: Yes, but this man . . . this same man served as mayor of Terre Haute for 20 years (laughs) . . .

NICHOLS: That's correct.

WBP: And during this period the Saturday Evening Post wrote an article talking about Terre Haute, "Indiana's delinquent city," which stirred quite a . . . made quite a stir in the city and, I think, resulted in some civic activist groups to try to clean up the city a bit.

NICHOLS: Yes, I think that's right. There was some part of the article . . . I remember the article real well. In the Saturday Evening Post, wasn't it?

WBP: Nineteen /hundred/ sixty-one, yes.

NICHOLS: And as I recall, there's no Saturday Evening Post now. It didn't succeed either or survive.

WBP: Well, it's now published in Indianapolis.

NICHOLS: Well, I know that, but the original publication ceased and failed. And that may tell us something about their policy. I don't know. It was an institution that failed.

WBP: The man who wrote it, however, is a successful author still.

NICHOLS: Is that right? Well, there were certain truths, of course, in the article. As I say, we were unique perhaps in accepting the status quo for a long, long time. That included the good things that we had and the bad things that we had.

WBP: You were an active Republican during these years and Tucker, of course, was a Democrat. Would you say that it was basically a one-party city for 20 years?

NICHOLS. Well, he succeeded a Republican, but it was . . . and at one time, John Ennis came within 54 votes of winning the election for mayor. So . . . and that was during the time that I was very active in politics. So it was . . . there was always the possibility that we would win, but we didn't.

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WBP: Would you say that politics perhaps is less important than some other factors that went on in the city during the time? Perhaps economic leadership? Or civic leadership? Which tended to think that Tucker was doing a good job or at least an adequate job?

NICHOLS: Well, I think you have to look at the background of the community and this goes 'way, way back. And they've . . . because of the type of employment in Terre Haute and the activity of the mine workers and Eugene Debs, Terre Haute became a town that would be more interested in the Democrat party than the Republican party. And they stayed that way for some time. It certainly isn't that way today and hasn't been for several years, but the roots were planted there. But as new people have moved in and things have changed a great deal, I think all of that is by the wayside today.

WBP: Terre Haute's been called a labor city. Would you call it a labor city during the years of your . . .

NICHOLS: Yes, I think that was . . . I think you could say that it was a labor city. The labor forces were unusually strong in Terre Haute.

WBP: So that meant . . .

NICHOLS: But again, that came from economic necessity, I think, and for the laboring man and the way things were going at that time in Terre Haute . . . long before my time.

WBP: Did that make it less attractive to new industry?

NICHOLS: It might have at one time. I don't think it does today. I think that . . . when they try to . . . I can remember many times, people would try to throw those statistics in. But the actual time lost by strikes and all were less in Terre Haute than maybe other similar cities.

WBP: It didn't seem to affect the reputation (chuckles) however?

NICHOLS: No, that's . . .

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WBP: Debs was still born here.

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: Is there anything else about the city's history that made it . . . gave it a stigma, perhaps, as a labor town?

NICHOLS: Well, I think it was a labor town! I mean we had industry that employed common laborers. It wasn't a highly skilled . . . the labor force was not highly skilled. I think that was probably one of the chief factors in limiting the early transition to a different type of economy. People . . . high technology plants wouldn't locate in Terre Haute because there wasn't the skilled people here at that time. We didn't have . . . most of our force, you might say, was a pick-and-shovel type. That's an exaggeration, of course. But that changed with the coming of Allis-Chalmers and . . . I think that was probably the biggest change. And Stran Steel was here, of course, before then and expanded continuously. Columbia Records . . .

WBP: So, industries that came in here found that even though there was a reputation of a strong labor center, they were able to get employees they needed and to hire them and make a profit.

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: But the strength of the laborer may have also strengthened the Democratic party, did it not?

NICHOLS: Why I think that was right in those days.

WBP: That made the Republican . . . put the Republicans somewhat at a disadvantage.

What about politics generally in Terre Haute? Would a young man who really wanted to get ahead and who was talented find it attractive to get into politics in Terre Haute?

NICHOLS: Well, I think Indiana itself is unique, you know. We seem to have had in the past a heritage of interest in the two-party political system in this state. And since my lifetime . . . in my lifetime I think we've had excellent state administrations governed by both political parties.

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NICHOLS: They've been moderate; we've never had a radical element or . . . and I think it's contributed to the growth of the state, and I think Terre Haute has been . . . certainly has been part of that.

WBP: You ran for state Senate in 1940. Did you ever consider running for a public office after that time?

NICHOLS: No, I didn't.

WBP: Why?

NICHOLS: Well, I was busy developing my own business; and I guess that's the excuse most people use for not going into politics. But I did take time to work with the party organization and support candidates and worked as a fund raiser and for several years was treasurer of the Republican central committee.

WBP: In Vigo County?

NICHOLS: In Vigo County.

WBP: From 1955 to 1962?

NICHOLS: Well, I'm not too sure of the dates, but those are roughly the times, I guess. I'm not sure.

WBP: During that time were you ever active . . . were you active in trying to get people to run for office?

NICHOLS: Yes.

WBP: Was it difficult . . .

NICHOLS: Yes.

WBP: . . . to do?

NICHOLS: It was difficult.

WBP: Was politics considered to be a little bit disreputable perhaps in Terre Haute? Or maybe . . .

NICHOLS: No, I don't think . . . I don't think it was necessarily disreputable. I just think that it's difficult to get qualified people to take time from their daily activities -- and certainly in the Republican party when we didn't have a very good record of success in winning -- to run.

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WBP: They weren't going to make much money either, were they? Even if they became mayor?

NICHOLS: No, and this is something that I have never . . . I don't believe that . . . I think that we have gone overboard in stressing that it's necessary to keep paying higher salaries to get better people in politics. It's been my observation . . . and I have been interested in politics as you probably know and as demonstrated by my record. I ran for office when I was in law school. And I've always been interested in politics. And I don't see that we have any better quality in the people we elect to office today than we did back 40 years ago. And people didn't run just for the money then. I think people take part in party politics because of the patronage system, and I think that's a good thing. I've always believed in the patronage system, and I think that a party will succeed or fail upon the type of people they appoint to office. And I think that if you're going to have an administration -- administrative type of government -- you have to appoint good people to help you in your administration or you won't be able to be elected the next time. And, of course, there are some people that are interested in that type of thing and that's from a money standpoint. It's their livelihood. And it should be.

WBP: Indiana's typically had that.

NICHOLS: That's right. And I see nothing wrong with it. The system's worked very well.

I think all we have to do is to look at some of these . . . in the legislature, I was very much opposed and made a talk once on channel 2 on when we went into the annual meeting of the legislature. The off year we were supposed to just work on the budget, and there are people that think we ought have a legislature in permanent session and /we/ ought to have staffs like they do in Illinois. Well, I don't think . . . I think you will . . . even today if you read the papers, you will see /in/ Illinois the legislature has more problems than we have in Indiana. And, of course, if you really believe in our government -- the type that I believe in . . . I believe in less regulation and less law rather than more law or more regulation. And I think people are beginning generally to adopt this attitude.

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WBP: Um hm.

NICHOLS: I don't think in Washington with all the new buildings that we've built and all the staffs that have been given to the congressmen and senators, we have a bit better national government than we had some 50 years ago when they didn't have that. And I hope that . . . and that goes for city government or anything else. I mean the less government to me is better.

WBP: Yes.

NICHOLS: Less regulation. And I think people should . . . I think we're adopting that philosophy more and more. I think we'll see that more in vogue in this country and in this community, particularly -- where you solve your problems yourself. You don't go to Washington and you don't go to Indianapolis. If you have to raise the local taxes, you have to raise the local taxes. I think there's something to be said and certainly in sort of retrospect; it bears out my philosophy that less government and less regulation is better. Therefore if the state or the federal government is going to tell the community how to run themselves, then they ought to provide for the funding. But that funding can only be provided from the taxpayer. They don't make money in Indianapolis. Or they don't . . . well, I guess they make it in Washington or print it. But it has to come eventually through taxes from the people. And so if you've got a problem, if you want more in your community, why then you ought to be willing to pay for it.

WBP: That means that really the local business and industrial interests or leaders have to take more responsibility. If the government's going to retract, they're going to have to have a civic awareness.

NICHOLS: That's right. And all organizations -- that goes for labor and civic organizations -- and everyone else is going to have to pitch in to help city governments and local governments to see that the people that are elected are qualified and that when they get in there, they get some help drawing budgets and all this sort of thing.

WBP: You have talked about Terre Haute being relatively self-satisfied, that there have been certain things that we haven't been able to accomplish or if we accomplished them, we accomplished

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WBP: them later than most cities -- such as the sewer system perhaps. The parking problem downtown . . . some people consider there still to be a parking problem downtown, and maybe there is. But the population over the years has held steady, and in the last two decades it has declined. Do you feel that . . . to what would you attribute the no-growth of Terre Haute and perhaps the enduring problems or the belated solution to problems? And I suppose one would have to say that if . . . there have been certain industrial leaders, certain economic leaders in this community who've had an enormous amount of economic power and political influence, too, I suppose. You'd have to say that their inaction or their action to . . . you know, their actions were involved somehow. But go ahead.

NICHOLS: I've never thought Terre Haute was a backward community. I know what statistics show about population, and we haven't gained in population. But you've got to remember that we replaced all the industry, practically, that we had 40 years ago with new industry.

WBP: Yes.

NICHOLS: And this new industry . . . we don't know what our economic position may be five years from now, but over the last ten years it has been satisfactory. We haven't had high unemployment rates here.

WBP: Such as Anderson or Kokomo.

NICHOLS: That's right! Or Newcastle . . .

WBP: South Bend.

NICHOLS: South Bend or . . . we just haven't had that here.

WBP: Basically, because of the diversification in industry.

NICHOLS: That's right. So I think we ought to . . . you know, let's not run down Terre Haute always and let's look at really what the facts are. We replaced it with . . . we replaced industry that was dying out with industry that's growing.

Let's look at our financial institutions.
We have one of the largest banks in the state here

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NICHOLS: in Terre Haute. We certainly have a competitive situation between the banking institutions. We've had very solid savings and loan associations that have helped the financing of houses. And our financial institutions have certainly grown with the times, and they are a size that they can participate and have participated -- I know personally -- in development of industry here in this city. I'm talking about in the last 15 or 20 years now. They're in a position to continue this. And I feel under the type of leadership they've got with younger people and the competition that they're engendering, that this will continue and this is good for the city. You've got strong financial institutions. You've got industries that can grow.

Our education . . . look at Indiana State. It's grown tremendously. I think we can recognize that there's going to be a limit to the need for just training teachers. And I see that, at least I think I see it, in the way they announce their change in programs and what they're doing at Indiana State that will answer the needs for this area-- educational institutions.

St. Mary's has certainly gotten themselves back on a very good footing I believe, due to young leadership out there both within the school and without on their board of trustees.

Rose-Hulman certainly has done a tremendous job. You've got your educational institutions here; your higher educational institutions that have grown, certainly in a satisfactory manner and providing, I would say, very progressive opportunities in the field of education. We ought to be very proud of them. Financial institutions are another one. I think that we have worked hard in the city to, maybe not meet the letter and "T" of the environmental protection act always, but we've worked on it. We're a much cleaner city than we were. Regardless of politics, the sewer situation has been improved here. Highways have improved.

WBP: I think we have to accept the fact somebody worked awfully hard to give us the base we have now. And there was leadership exerted.

NICHOLS: We're one of the few cities this size that have three television stations. And I'm proud that I was the first stockholder in channel 2 when we

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NICHOLS: started that back . . . tried to put it together back in '57. I think we were about 7 or 8 years getting our license. And that group started out not just out of a motive to make money -- we hoped, of course, that it would be profitable and it was -- but we wanted to give the community greater diversification. We only had one channel and we were entitled to two. And it was local people that did that. So, we've got pretty good communications with radio stations and TV stations here. And we've had a change in our newspaper. I don't know what the present status as far as the strike situation goes -- I'm not close to that situation -- but I'm sure it'll straighten itself out. And when it finally resolves itself, we'll have a stronger newspaper than we've had in the past.

WBP: Then you're an optimist?

NICHOLS: I'm very much of an optimist. I have been and I've stated so publicly. I think we've got a lot of things going for us in Terre Haute.

We're in the center of a very important region, geographically. We've got excellent transportation facilities by highway. If there is a rejuvenation at any time in the railroading system, why we certainly won't be left out of it. We've got an excellent airport, water supplies, power supplies, energy. We're blessed with all the things that a community needs.

Plus, we've got I think a new spirit. I mean there's a leadership program, as you know, that was started two or three years ago that I think will help in time. There's no one thing will be the salvation. No one thing is the answer, but all of these things help just a little. It's just another drop of goodness in the bottle of the joy and Your interest in the historical museum has certainly been a credit. I mean it's helped build spirit in the community, Bill that . . .

WBP: Good.

NICHOLS: . . . I think it's very commendable.

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WBP: Alan Rankin says that when he came to Terre Haute there was this -- oh what? -- "elephant," he calls it, of apathy in the city. And perhaps that's what you were talking about earlier when you talked about the self-satisfaction.

NICHOLS: That's right.

WBP: But there were some people working behind the scenes, and they were doing large tasks for the city. The Tumpene industrial district came in during Alan Rankin's tenure in office but also with the help of important civic leaders and perhaps they should be recognized and get credit. Everybody knows about Tony Hulman's influence. Are there other individuals who ought to be mentioned as financial leaders in the community?

NICHOLS: Yes. I remember the first man that greeted me in Terre Haute. I arrived . . . I forget the exact date. About the 3rd of January I went through Walter Reed Hospital for a final physical. I was in Washington with my wife visiting her mother at Christmas and then came back on the train. And I got down to the office at 8 o'clock in the morning. And there was a man standing at 7 North 7th Street the entrance to our office to greet me. The first man that greeted me was Ben Blumberg. Well, I didn't recognize him and he introduced himself. And he said, "I knew you when you were a little boy, George, and watched you grow up." And I said, "I certainly know who you are, Mr. Blumberg." And he was there to just welcome me. He said, "I knew that you were moving to town, and I just wanted to try to be the first man to welcome you." I thought that was very fine.

As a matter of fact, now that was in January of '46, in the winter. We stood there visiting; he came in, and I walked to the doorway with him when he left. I made some disparaging comment on the air situation -- the dirty air that we have. And he said, "Young man, you keep talking like that, and you'll end up on the smoke abatement committee . . . "

WBP: (chortles)

NICHOLS: " . . . which I am very much interested in." Well, I avoided that (laughs), but Mr. Blumberg was always interested in anything that would help the community. He was, of course, noted for his philanthropy. But

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NICHOLS: he was willing to invest money in any worthwhile project that came along that showed any promise for growth of the city.

And I've always been very fond of Mr. Hulman, always very fond of him, because when I moved after 18 months, I moved into the Rea Building at 728 Wabash which was owned by Hulman and Company. Dave Bronson, who had an insurance agency here then and was part of the Hulman group, stated -- when I went to see him about the building the first time -- that there were about 20 applicants for it. It had been, prior to my occupancy, a bar called the Theater Bar. It had been closed and there needed to be a lot of renovation to make it an adequate office location.

WBP: This was about what year?

NICHOLS: Nineteen ~~/Hundred/~~ forty-eight. And Mr. Bronson said keep in touch with him and I did almost daily, if not hourly, but several times a week. And in just a few days, I found out that . . . he said, "I don't know how this decision was made, George, but Mr. Hulman's going to fix that up for you." I said, "Hell, that's very nice of Mr. Hulman. I'm not acquainted with him, only by name." And he did. They renovated the building at their expense, and he said if you're a young businessman coming to Terre Haute, he wants to help you.

So, I felt very good about that. So those two men, I think have done a lot for Terre Haute that they really never received credit for.

WBP: There are just a myriad of things, no doubt, that they did. Are there other things that you would like to mention at this point that they helped to accomplish in Terre Haute?

NICHOLS: (pause) Well, Mr. Hulman, of course, was a prime mover -- one of the prime movers -- along with Mr. Blumberg, in the fairgrounds and in various charitable ways. I'm sure he was active in the development of Meadows shopping center and the northside plaza, which showed his faith in the future of Terre Haute. He didn't just stay downtown. He'd developed these . . .

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WBP: Part of the . . . in the interviews we've had, periodically people have said that one of the reasons for Terre Haute's . . . the apathy that one could say existed or did exist to some extent, the lack of civic participation was an attitude of "let Tony do it." And . . . was there an atmosphere of that to any extent because of his enormous influence and wealth?

NICHOLS: Well, I think a lot of people use that as an excuse not to do something themselves. And then there was one other matter that they used in business. I know that when we were soliciting people to become stockholders in channel 2, some people'd say, "Oh, you know, Mr. Hulman owns channel 10 and I don't think he would want me to do this. I wouldn't want to do something that Tony wouldn't want me to do."

Well, I knew the man very well, loved him very much. And I never found that to be true. I never found him trying to hold anybody back. In fact, when you got to know him, he was always doing the other. He wanted to see things progress. He owned a lot of property here, and the only way property is to become valuable is in a progressive community. He couldn't do it all himself.

WBP: Would you say he was very much aware of that, too?

NICHOLS: Oh, absolutely! He was aware of the criticism that he got. And he did in his own little way things that . . . you know, to try to find out why it was caused and what could overcome that. He was a very busy person and sort of a shy person, but he made people available to the community to help and participate. He was limited; everyone has a limit to their time that they can devote to things. But he certainly encouraged people in his own organization and outside to do things. I know that. And I never found it at anytime that he tried to stifle anybody's interest or in making the community progress or in trying to better themselves. In fact, my experience with him was always just the opposite.

WBP: Um hm. Good.

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

NICHOLS: He personally helped me in getting located here. In the place downtown, I occupied it for 20 years until I moved. And I moved on South 3rd when this area started to grow that way.

WBP: So people might have used Tony as an excuse for . . .

NICHOLS: I think that's right. We all tend to find some excuse if we don't want to do something. Well, I can't do it. You know, I can't do that. If a person wants to do something, they go out and do it.

WBP: Well, for instance, he made sure that the /Vigo County/ Historical Society got that Markle house and . . .

NICHOLS: That's right!

WBP: . . . he also turned over the Sage-Robinson-Nagel house to the Historical Society. It is where the museum /Historical Museum of the Wabash Valley/ is today. So, he was the chief benefactor one could say.

NICHOLS: After making the land available for the Hulman Center, I know from conversation I had with him early one morning in his office that he pointed /in the direction of the Center/. We were talking about another project and well, he said, "You know I understand they don't have enough money to get comfortable seats for that place." He said, "We're going to have to see we have comfortable seats over there, George. And it's going to take a little more money. I want to see that they get those." And, of course, we do have excellent seats.

WBP: Yes, we do.

NICHOLS: And I personally know that. There was never any announcement made, but he told me that. And he told me that he was going to complete this . . . at the same time he was completing this museum for the old cars over in Indianapolis which is, you know, a great thing for our state and our community.

WBP: Do you know the dream that he might have had for Terre Haute in the years ahead? Well, if you . . . do you know of a vision that he might have tried to implement had he lived?

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

NICHOLS: (long pause) No, I don't know that I could state that in so many words.

WBP: He was an old car collector, and he seemed to collect other odds and ends that were of historic interest in the local community. I understand that there are a number of different things kind of stashed around the Hulman complex.

NICHOLS: That's what I understand, too.

WBP: That he bid on the Mansfield mill, for instance, as though he might have had some idea about that. I don't know. But would those be clues to some kind of . . .

NICHOLS: Well, I don't . . . I'm not really acquainted with that so I don't know. I don't know.

But I do know that on one occasion he had a visit with Vern McMillan just toward the end of his /McMillan's/ mayor's reign, right back of our building in the alley. He used to go from his building down across back of the Rea Building into the Terre Haute House frequently, and I'd see . . . I guess in the early days, I saw Tony more in the alley than anyplace else (laughing) in town. We'd meet back there. Got to be good friends.

And Vern was my next-door neighbor -- Vern McMillan's business. And he related to me one day that Tony had stopped him in the alley, and it was right near the end of his administration. And /Tony/ was trying to find out some way that, you know, things could be improved here in the community. What could be done to really . . . what was -- in his opinion, in McMillan's opinion -- was holding this back, you know. I remember that day very well. It's been a long, long time ago now. And then at the same time, /some people would/ say, "Well, Tony Hulman doesn't want this done." Or, "He's holding us back." I know many people talked that way. /Tony would say/, "What can we do? What can we do to help?" /I think he meant how can we change the community spirit./

It wasn't just giving money. I mean, that wasn't the thing. That's not what he had in mind. I don't think just the money itself is the thing that makes a community grow or a good place to live. You've got to have community spirit.

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

NICHOLS: And how you generate that, I guess, and how you get it is the 64-dollar question? (laughs)

WBP: I'm not sure I followed that. You said McMillan and Tony . . . at one point McMillan wanted to know . . .

NICHOLS: No! Tony wanted to know.

WBP: I see.

NICHOLS: He asked the mayor.

WBP: I see.

NICHOLS: But he was just sort of reminiscing. And he said, "You know, what can we do to really make this thing go better?" I mean the town. Everything in the town -- this thing, this community.

WBP: So it's a mistake, the people who were saying that Tony held them back? Were making . . .

NICHOLS: Absolutely! They were wrong. I mean they were very much wrong. And, of course, to a man . . . well, everybody thinks he ought to give all the money. I mean, you know, whatever it is, he ought to give all the money, no matter what he's got. He's a wealthy man That's the reaction of most of us, I guess. And that isn't the way you get things done. Everybody has to participate in these activities.

WBP: And there were times that he even helped to bring people together to participate, isn't that right?

NICHOLS: That's right. In his way, in his way.

WBP: Terre Haute Civic Improvement itself was one . . . something that he helped to get started. He participated in it.

Are there other leaders that deserve mention here in Terre Haute over the years? That have improved it, made it a better place in which to live?

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

NICHOLS: Oh, I suppose there's lots of them. Recently, there is Alan Rankin who has done a lot for the community. John Logan certainly has done a lot for the community, given their time and their ability in the past 10 years, anyway. I think that's apparent to everybody that lives here.

It's difficult to name names. Those are two that come to my mind immediately.

WBP: Um hm. Did you know Forrest Sherer very well?

NICHOLS: Yes, I knew Forrest very well. Forrest was very active in the community and certainly was active in many activities. A building was named in his honor down at Gibault for duties . . . and active in the Boys' Club. And, yes, I knew Forrest very well. He sponsored me in the Terre Haute Credit Man's Association when I came to town. He and my father were good friends, and he was a man that was always available. You'd see him on the street and around.

WBP: What's your vision for Terre Haute in the future? You are an optimist. What would you like to see? What would Terre Haute look like, say 20 years from now if you had your way?

NICHOLS: Well, I would like to see the downtown area, rather than being replaced with a lot . . . or rather than being filled in with a lot of high-rises, I would like to see that area landscaped, some housing put down there and supporting institutions. You need drugstores, you need a new grocery, you need a restaurant, shops, etc.. I think the area down there would make -- and the surrounding area -- would make an ideal place for elderly people to live. There are churches downtown. There are theaters downtown. The library is downtown. The university, which has many functions, is downtown. I think it would be an ideal place for elderly people to live with the proper housing facilities built. But I'd like to see an open area -- parks. And I think that's one of the things that we have to work more on here.

I think Mayor Chalos had a fine idea when he started off having these neighborhood clean-up drives. I would hope that those would continue.

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side

NICHOLS: And I would hope that they could be organized, not just by the mayor's office, but by people . . . civic-minded individuals in those areas. And we have a lot of parks in Terre Haute, but, you know, some of them are not too well taken care of. Of course, the park administration I think is appointed by the administration. But I've traveled a lot abroad the last few years. I just got back from a 9-week trip to Europe. And as I look at those beautiful gardens around in London and all and other cities, too . . . I was in Bulgaria and the capital, Sofia. And the older people, particularly, were mowing the lawns, raking and working the flower beds and everything like that.

Some of this, of course, is maybe their livelihood, but some of it maybe is in their interest in having a better community and a cleaner community. It was my first trip to Sofia . . . to Bulgaria. Of course, it is a communist area. I was surprised with the cleanliness in that city. I think probably next to Singapore that it's the cleanest city in the world. And that was a great surprise to me.

And I think that we could make our city the cleanest city. This has to be done with education. When the Dairy Queen was open here down at the other end of the block from my office, our area around here was constantly littered with milk shake containers, paper, and stuff like that. But first of all, you have to have containers to put these in. And I don't see any containers around for people to put their things in. They ought to be not only in the store, they ought to be outside the store. We ought to have a container, it seems to me, like one about every block -- maybe two or three times in a block. And they ought to be emptied regularly. But we ought to encourage people to use them.

We've come a long way in the last ten years. I can remember about . . . oh, I suspect 12 or 15 years ago I was in Lincoln, Nebraska, and I was in a hurry to get to an airplane and I was a little late. And I had eaten a candy bar. I dropped the paper. Not by accident, on purpose on the floor. I just wanted to get rid of it. I was going . . . and a girl came up, and she said, "Sir, you dropped a candy wrapper back there and there's a container over there." Well, I picked it up. And . . .

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

WBP: That's what you call peer pressure.

NICHOLS: That's right. And you know if it meant enough to her to call my attention to it, why I didn't get mad or anything /and I was happy to cooperate/. I thought it was probably a good idea. It's little things like that that makes us maybe change our ideas or makes us more conscious of the need to keep our area cleaner.

WBP: Is that . . . the failure to do that, is that simply selfishness, individualism taken to the extreme?

NICHOLS: Oh, I don't think it's necessarily selfishness. I think it's just sort of forgetfulness, lack of training. That's it! If you've done this, you know, you . . .

WBP: But also, lack of concern for your neighbor. Because your neighbor's going to be hurt by that.

NICHOLS: That's right. That's right. And this is education. I think this can be done in the schools. I mean I think there's a lot of things we could do in the schools that we don't do. The teaching of civic responsibility to people.

WBP: That has to start at the home first, though.

NICHOLS: It should start in the home. There's no question about that. It should start in the home and then in the schools and in all the . . . And first thing you know . . . and all organizations and the first thing you know, then maybe you begin to change the pattern.

What I would like to see in this area . . . I would like to see this downtown area not just filled in with concrete and blacktop like Indianapolis. You know, you get up to the top of Indiana National Bank and look down and you see a black jungle of blacktop down below. Now, we could park cars underground. They do that in San Francisco and they do it in Chicago. It may be expensive, but if it makes for better living and everything, then we can afford some of these things. And we ought to consider putting in a . . . rather than building high-rise garages, maybe we ought to consider -- while the buildings are down -- putting garages underneath these places.

GEORGE O. NICHOLS
Tape 1-Side 2

WBP: Chicago did it.

NICHOLS: That's right. They were forced to. But do these things before you're forced to do it.

WBP: For instance, so if there were a new downtown retailing area, there would have to be parking garages for that, and you would recommend having those underground?

NICHOLS: I think that ought to be studied and I doubt if it's at all feasible.

WBP: Well, it's going to be very costly. It's extremely costly to build underground.

NICHOLS: Well, I don't know whether it is or not. I suppose it is.

WBP: I've heard it is.

NICHOLS: I've heard but no one really knows about it.

END OF TAPE.

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